DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 072 413 CS 000 328

AUTHOR	Durkin, Dolores
TITLE	Early Reading Instruction--Is It Advantageous?
PUB DATE	Apr 71
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Assn. (16th, Atlantic City, April 1971)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Beginning Reading; *Early Reading; Kindergarten Children; *Primary Grades; *Reading Achievement; Reading Development; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Research; Reading Skills

ABSTRACT

Some of the research dealing with pre-first-grade reading is discussed in relation to an experimental program with four-year-olds and pre-first-grade reading. The author states that little factual information exists for this topic and the majority of existing reports deal primarily with Head Start. Some of the shortcomings of reports on early reading are indicated: (1) failure to specify methodology; (2) failure to indicate the amount of time spent on reading; (3) insufficient descriptions of reading; (4) use of limited kinds of instruction; and (5) failure to stay with pre-first-grade readers long enough to assess the future effects. The report indicated that a basic problem in pre-first-grade reading is that many schools are not ready to deal with earlier starts in reading and that meaningful assessments of pre-first-grade starts in reading cannot occur until schools use and take advantage of such starts. (WR)

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 072413

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Dolores Durkin

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

Early Reading Instruction--Is It Advantageous?

Dolores Durkin
University of Illinois

About a year ago I was preparing a detailed report of findings from a two-year experimental program which I had developed in connection with a small school system in Illinois. The program had started with two groups of four-year-olds and took them through what would have been their kindergarten year. The intent of this two-year effort was to give the children interesting opportunities to learn to read, opportunities that were constantly viewed within the context of all the language arts. Thus, the title of that report, which was published in the Reading Research Quarterly last summer, was "A Language Arts Program for Pre-First Grade Children" (2).

I mention the report now because in preparing it I naturally had to review the available and pertinent literature so that I could place my program in a larger context and, in addition, compare its findings with those reported by other researchers who also had worked on reading with pre-first grade children.

Before I began the systematic library search, I had the feeling that not much would be found no matter how extensive that search might be. Actually, it was more than just a feeling because, after all, the topic of pre-first grade reading has been central to my professional life for the past decade. As a result, I have kept up fairly well with what others were saying and writing and reporting.

CS 000 328

In any case, I started the library work and, to my surprise and disappointment, found even less than I had expected. Assuming that I might have missed something, I next went over to the ERIC Center for Early Childhood Education, conveniently located on our campus. However, even with the assistance of its staff I found myself left with the same conclusion: how little systematic work has been done on the topic of pre-first grade reading! A second conclusion was the impression that we think we know more than we really do about what I believe to be an important topic.

Because of time limitations today, I am only going to refer to a few of the reports I found and, through them, reinforce the contention that we have very little factual information about the topic being considered at this session.

Available Reports

Unquestionably, the vast majority of reports that did describe school programs for children younger than six dealt with Head Start. Almost invariably these were short-term programs which had vaguely defined goals. When goals were clearly identified, they often had to do with raising the children's IQ's. In fact, it was as if researchers had a compulsive need to raise IQ scores. As a result, research efforts often took the form of doing whatever would lead to higher performance on some intelligence test. What this really accomplishes is something I've never understood.

An atypical Head Start program--atypical in that it had precisely defined academic goals--was the one widely promoted by Bereiter and Engelmann. In spite of this, however, the very few times they put their findings

into writing, the resulting report was still only minimally helpful in assessing the value of earlier starts in reading. For instance, in one description of the accomplishments of a small group of children who had participated in their program for two years, the researchers noted that their mean reading score was at the 2.6 grade level--an impressive accomplishment, everyone would admit, for children not yet in first grade (1). However, with the test used to measure their achievement, the Wide Range Achievement Test, a reading grade-level of 2.6 can be attained by naming 13 letters plus 22 words. Clearly the use of such an instrument can foster misleading conclusions. In addition, it allows for little of the kind of information that can be used by other researchers to make judgments about the relative success or failure of their own academic endeavors with pre-first grade children.

A few endeavors other than those of researchers working with disadvantaged children have been reported. There is, for instance, the widely publicized study completed in the Denver public schools. The title of the final report of this longitudinal research seems very relevant for the question being considered at this session for it is called, "The Effectiveness of Teaching Reading in the Kindergarten" (5). I studied that report carefully and was surprised to learn that the experimental instruction carried on during the kindergarten year centered primarily on teaching children to use a context, plus the initial consonant sound in an unknown word, to decide what that word is. Clearly, this is a very limited kind of instruction; one consequence is limited information about earlier starts in reading.

Another and all too common shortcoming is exemplified in another

report called, "An Experimental Study of Formal Reading Instruction at the Kindergarten Level" (4). This tells of a comparison of two kindergarten groups, one of which received what the authors called "formal reading instruction." That's the only description given; consequently, because I've never been able to decide what people mean by "formal instruction", I was left uninformed. The description of what happened in the second kindergarten was equally unclear. The children there had what the researchers called "customary kindergarten readiness instruction"--whatever that means. In telling about the hardly unexpected finding that the children who were taught to read scored significantly higher on a reading achievement test administered at the end of the year, the authors only gave the results of an analysis of variance, again leaving the really interested reader with many unanswered questions.

The same problem characterized still other reports of earlier reading because their authors failed to specify the methodology that was used; or neglected to mention the amount of time spent on reading; or because they either omitted information about what was achieved or, when they did include it, their descriptions were insufficiently detailed. The end result of the appearance of these and still other reports is that we tend to be left with the impression that a great deal of work is being done in the area of pre-first grade reading when, in fact, what has been done has been reported in a way that does not permit us to plan subsequent studies, or to advance in our understanding of the best time to begin reading instruction.

Still another reason why we are able to say very little about the

advantages--or disadvantages--of earlier starts in reading is that researchers simply do not stay with pre-first grade readers long enough to assess the future effects in any meaningful way. (One notable exception here is the Denver Study.) In other words, longitudinal research is just about nil.

Because of this omission, I have always done research that is longitudinal. Although difficult to do, it is only long-term studies that can answer significant questions. Now I am following the progress of the children who participated in my experimental program for four- and five-year-olds. They are currently in second grade. What I have uncovered in doing longitudinal research--first with children who learned to read at home and now with children who participated in my school program--is that it comes close to being impossible to learn about the future value of earlier starts because schools, as now constituted, seem unable to take advantage of them (3). The point I'm making is simply this: if children who can read when they enter first grade--either because of home or school help--are treated as if they cannot read, then, quite obviously, it is impossible for a researcher to assess the future value of their earlier start. This means, then, that if such starts are to be assessed in terms of either their advantages or disadvantages, first grades--even though they have been associated for a very long time with beginning reading--must be able to respond appropriately to children who are beyond the beginning point.

Maintenance of Traditional Practices

How tradition can dominate school practices was highlighted for me

in connection with the two year program I mentioned earlier. For the two years, I had complete control over its curriculum and instruction. However, once the children started first grade it became clear very quickly that I would be allowed to have almost no influence; and that, instead, traditional practices would prevail. Let me give you just one concrete example of what I mean.

When the children who participated in the program started first grade, all of them were reading--some quite well. Because the principal of the school they would be attending had been given very detailed reports of their accomplishments, I found it hard to believe that school plans included giving these children a readiness test in first grade. I found this hard to believe because, after all, if children who are already reading have not demonstrated readiness, then who in the world has? In any case, readiness tests were administered.

During the past two years, as the research subjects have been spending time in first grade and then second, I have had many other opportunities to see how tradition, not children, affect practices. More specifically, I've had the chance to see that many schools simply are not ready to deal with earlier starts in reading. Once, for instance, I was visiting in one of the first grade classrooms in which some of my research subjects had been placed. On the day of the observation, which lasted slightly less than an hour, the teacher gave approximately forty minutes of instructional time to a group of poor readers and exactly ten minutes to my research subjects. Later, I asked whether she always divided her time that way. She said, "Most of the time," and went on to explain, "These

children (meaning my research subjects) do well on their own. I like to give my time to children who have problems."

What she was underscoring, of course, was the fact that we will never be able to come up with meaningful assessments of pre-first grade starts in reading unless schools use and take advantage of such starts. In addition, of course, we will not be able to arrive at reliable conclusions until and unless we have both better research as well as better reporting. This sounds negative and pessimistic, I know. However, to recognize the fact that we lack carefully documented answers is important. Otherwise we will continue to believe that we know more than we really do. And that is undesirable for any profession, including education.

REFERENCES

1. Bereiter, C., and Engelmann, S. "The Effectiveness of Direct Verbal Instruction on IQ and Achievement in Reading and Arithmetic." (undated mimeo)
2. Durkin, Dolores. "A Language Arts Program for Pre-First Grade Children: Two-Year Achievement Report," Reading Research Quarterly, V (Summer, 1970), 534-565.
3. Durkin, Dolores. Children Who Read Early. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1966.
4. Kelley, Marjorie L. and Chen, M. K. "An Experimental Study of Formal Reading Instruction at the Kindergarten Level," Journal of Educational Research, LX (January, 1967), 224-229.
5. McKee, P., Brzeinski J. E., and Harrison, M. Lucile. "The Effectiveness of Teaching Reading in the Kindergarten." Denver Public Schools, Denver, Colorado, 1966. (mimeo)